

Testimony before the Housing Committee

*Claudette J. Beaulieu
Deputy Commissioner for Programs*

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Good evening Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Butler, and distinguished members of the Housing Committee. I am Claudette Beaulieu, Deputy Commissioner for Programs at the Department of Social Services. I am here today to testify in support of **HB 6366, An Act Concerning the Establishment of the Department of Housing.**

This bill implements the recommendations of the Interagency Council on Affordable Housing, which were outlined in the Council's January 2013 report as required by Public Act 12-1 of the June 2012 Special Session.

The Department of Social Services (DSS) currently funds and administers many housing programs for low-income individuals. Accordingly, we were appointed to serve on the Interagency Council on which we actively participated at all scheduled meetings. The interactive and open process enabled a broad range of stakeholders to present examples of successful agency consolidations, agree on necessary principles ensure adequate, safe housing, discuss concerns, and make recommendations. The Interagency Council listened and deliberated in a very open and professional manner and completed their report in January of this year.

The Council's report presents sound rationale for the consolidation of similar housing-related programs, currently administered by several state agencies, into one entity. Under the current system, DSS administers the state's Rental Assistance Program, but the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) operates the state's Elderly Rental Assistance Program, the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) administers the Elderly/Disabled Renters' Rebate Program, and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) provides rental assistance subsidies to certain individuals. This disjointed system can be confusing to state residents in need of housing assistance. A consolidated system is more consumer-friendly and will be considerably easier to navigate for potential and existing clients. In addition, the new department enhances the state's ability to create a comprehensive and coordinated housing policy for the state. For example, with the responsibility for homeless shelters, transitional living, and permanent affordable housing options all under one "roof," policies and programs can focus on a continuum of needs with shared outcomes and goals.

Today I again affirm the department's full commitment to the recommendations included in the Council's report and offer the department's support of HB 6366 which implements the Governor's recommended budget. We at DSS are prepared to work with the new leadership at the Department of Housing (DOH) to ensure a successful transition of the department programs listed in Section IV. However, our work will not end once the programs are transitioned. We will collaborate with DOH leadership and staff to ensure that low-income clients served by our department continue to access housing services throughout the state.

State-funded DSS programs that will transfer to the new housing department include the Rental Assistance Program (RAP), Residences for Persons with AIDS, Emergency Shelters for Homeless, Eviction and Foreclosure Prevention Program (which includes the Housing/Mediation Services and Rent Bank), Transitional Living, and the Security Deposit Guarantee Program. Federally-funded programs such as the Section 8 Housing Voucher program and the Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS will also transfer from DSS to DOH.

One point we wish to make clear to the committee is that all but one of the programs to be transferred from DSS to DOH are run at the community level by organizations under contract with DSS and these contracts will transfer to DOH. The programs are not run out of DSS regional offices and as such, clients will continue to interact with the same community-based organizations at the local level.

Specifically, with regard to Section 8 and RAP, DSS is responsible for supporting approximately 10,000 Connecticut families with housing subsidies via a statewide contractor. As stated above, Section 8 and RAP families do not visit or otherwise interact with DSS regional offices for their housing subsidy services as they do for other services such as Medicaid and SNAP. Rather, housing assistance is accessed directly through our contracted vendor. This interface is not expected to change under DOH. DSS has extended the length of its contract with the vendor in order to ensure that there is a smooth transition to DOH.

Other current DSS programs such as emergency shelters, transitional living programs, residences for persons with AIDS and eviction and foreclosure prevention programs are all services that are provided through community-based agencies via contracts, and again, these contracts will transfer to DOH.

The one program that is currently run out of the DSS regional offices – the Security Deposit Guarantee Program – has been folded into the re-procurement of the Eviction and Foreclosure Prevention Program, which is currently run by twelve community-based organizations. We feel this will provide greater access to the program at the local level.

We would like to recommend a few technical corrections in Section 46, which includes language that is necessary to allow DSS to share confidential information with DOH in

order to administer the Tax Relief for Elderly Renters program. The corrections are as follows:

- Line 1967 – delete “or (12) to any authorized representative of the”
- Lines 1968 and 1969 – delete in their entirety
- Line 1973 – after “chapter 32” insert “, or (12) to any authorized representative of the Commissioner of Housing for the purpose of verifying whether an applicant for the renters rebate program established by section 12-170d, as amended by this act, is a recipient of cash assistance from the Department of Social Services and the amount of such assistance”.

We applaud the work and efforts of the Interagency Council on Affordable Housing and look forward to our continued work with our sister state agencies to bring the Department of Housing to fruition.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this evening and I welcome any questions you may have.